

A new administration demands a new policy

By Sam Farr

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The ocean covers nearly three-quarters of Earth's surface. Its 139 million square miles of water make up about 97 percent of the world's supply.

Our coastal regions are invaluable to the health of the nation. According to The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, one in every six jobs is marine-related; more than one-third of the Gross National Product comes from coastal areas.

And our dependence on the ocean continues to grow. Ocean-related industries contribute hundreds of billions of dollars to the U.S. economy.

We even owe the ocean for the air we breathe: Most oxygen in the atmosphere comes from photosynthetic organisms in the ocean.

So why do we treat the ocean so poorly?

Much of our neglect stems from ignorance. Signs of abuse abound, from a history of overfishing to unregulated dumping of waste. The effects of this mistreatment are just as easy to find, including dead zones where no life survives to plummeting levels of ocean creatures.

The federal government, which rightfully plays a major role in how we treat the ocean, often makes problems worse. But with Barack Obama in the White House and Democrats controlling Congress, we're facing a historic opportunity to reshape the way we think about and govern the ocean.

Currently, within the U.S. government, six federal departments share control of the ocean. Dozens of agencies divvy up oversight duties, have more than 140 often-conflicting and overlapping laws to contend with and lack the capacity to decide conflicts.

But we're setting the stage to fix that.

In January, I will be re-introducing the Ocean Conservation, Education and National Strategy for the 21st Century Act (Oceans-21). Previous versions stalled under Republican Congresses; while the bill was approved earlier this year by a House Subcommittee, it was hijacked by offshore drilling special interests.

With gas prices falling and the decline of drilling as a pivotal issue, we're looking to bypass those hurdles and dive into the action in 2009. I've spoken with Rep. Nick Rahall (D-W. Va.) - chairman of the House Committee on Natural Resources, and he's as eager as I am to see this bill signed into law.

The guts of the legislation will fundamentally alter how we govern the ocean. Right now, we paint policy in wide swathes with little regional contribution - and often zero local input.

This bill creates a national ocean policy that places the proper value on regional input and focuses policymakers on ecosystem-based models of governance. We need to make sure that locals, those who best know their own waters, are involved in the decision making.

The bill would create regional and national ocean advisory committees, groups that bring all levels of stakeholders to the table. It would also create a cabinet-level position of ocean advisor.

Last year, we celebrated the 200th birthday of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, a group established by Thomas Jefferson and the predecessor of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. But NOAA has never been codified into law. It exists at the whim of each presidential administration. Oceans-21 would correct this, officially establishing NOAA as the chief ocean agency. We must maintain the continuity of work and knowledge that it offers

US.

This bill implements the recommendations of the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative, a bipartisan effort between the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy and the Pew Oceans Commission.

The goal of the Joint Commission is noble: "to accelerate the pace of change that results in meaningful ocean policy reform." And that reform is long overdue.

Our youngest piece of major ocean legislation is more than 30 years old: the Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Conservation and Management Act, which is only a single piece of a bigger puzzle. We must advance our ocean policy into the 21st century.

The stakes are high. We're faced with pollution, beach erosion, disruptive development and overfishing. We'll need to tackle these issues as more people move to the coast and more companies harvest the fruits of our waters.

The obstacles are many, but we're lucky to have many organizations and individuals rising to the challenge, both in the United States and abroad. I'm looking forward to 2009 as a great year to build on the work we've already accomplished in Congress.

Washington has wisely given us a Clean Air Act and a Clean Water Act. It's time we get around to passing a "Clean Ocean Act"; Oceans-21.

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